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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an approach to teaching composition using a student-recorded cassette tape. A general outline is given for using the cassette tape in the classroom to help students improve their reading, punctuation, written dialogue, and sentence patterns. Cassette tapes can also help students to avoid stilted and awkward repetition and to revise and rewrite their compositions. (TS)

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Taped Resources: The Minds of Our Students

For years we have recognized the value of audio-visual aids in teaching everything from biology to marketing, from engineering to English literature. Our colleges have purchased thousands of 16mm projectors, slide carrousels, tape recorders, and record players. They have set up speech labs and language labs and closed-circuit TV systems. In our literature classes we have greatly expanded our use of films and filmstrips, of records and pre-recorded tapes to supplement our lectures and stimulate class discussion. But in our composition and creative writing classes we have moved more slowly to take advantage of the multi-media approach.

The resistance to using the available media stems, apparently, from several causes. First, some instructors believe that writing is hard work and that it cannot, therefore, be taught by gimmickry. They make sharp distinctions between written and oral communication, and they teach primarily by handbooks and red ink. Then, some professors abhor anything mechanical. They believe that the mechanical is necessarily antithetical to the aesthetic and that the mere presence of a machine is enough to stifle creativity. Finally, some who have experimented with the media in their composition classes have come away from the experiment disillusioned. The use of projectors usually requires a darkened room, hindering both note taking and discussion. Films cannot be interrupted easily in order to stress pertinent points. Pre-recorded tapes are often dull and always slightly inappropriate for one's own peculiarly individual

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class. But there is one simple mechanical aid that is effective: the student-recorded cassette tape.

I first discovered the value of the cassette when I taught an advanced writing course last year. Comfortably settled in my rut, I had asked several students to read their papers aloud. One of these papers had a particularly weak introduction, filled with redundancy, monotonous sentence structure, and awkward phraseology. As I heard it, I was even more acutely aware of its flaws than I had been when I had read it. Furthermore, I noticed that the student was having extraordinary difficulty in reading his own writing. I decided that if he could hear himself he would realize that the paper needed revision and where the revisions should occur. I called him in for a conference and had him tape the reading. We worked together for an hour--reading, listening, discussing the discrepancies between the tape and the manuscript, and revising the writing. When he left, I was sure that I had found an indispensable teaching aid; he was elated to have discovered a mechanical tutor.

I took the cassette to the next class meeting and recorded the reading of the first paper. Then I distributed copies of the manuscript and asked the students to read the text as they listened to the tape, marking any discrepancies and noting any questions raised by the reading. They were amazed at the number of times the writer had stumbled in reading her paper and at the number of times she had departed from her text. They argued about the best way to rework one particularly awkward sentence, asking that it be replayed several times. We recorded four variations of it before

we were satisfied with the result. They spotted and objected to the staccato effect of a group of five very short sentences. They questioned everything from the diction to the punctuation. The newness of the approach was undoubtedly responsible for much of their enthusiasm, but part of it resulted from the fact that for the first time they had really heard what a writer was trying to say. Even more important, for the first time she actually heard what she had said. She could hear flaws that no amount of red ink could have shown her. And because she could so clearly determine the parts of her paper that needed additional work, she was highly motivated to do the revisions.

During the rest of the term the students were required to submit a taped reading of each paper they turned in. I assumed that progress would be slow and that I had condemned myself to listening to several hundred hours of bad reading, but within a couple of assignments the reading showed marked improvement. The writing was also much better than it had been at the beginning of the experiment. I was not receiving rough drafts hoping to pass as finished compositions. The class discussions, based on simultaneously hearing the tapes and reading the manuscripts, remained lively as the technique continued to stimulate close analysis of the writing. The gimmick had worked. The machine had fostered creativity.

A study of the changes that occurred in the students' papers and of the course evaluation forms that they completed at the end of the term has shown the specific types of writing problems that the cassette best helped them to solve.

Of course, it was extremely helpful in teaching them to

avoid stiltedness, especially in writing dialogue. For example, when one student heard his reading of the following brief excerpt from a locker room exchange, he discovered that there were seven discrepancies between the manuscript and the tape:

> As Moose laced his black high-top football shoes, in came second year man Willie Jackson. Willie slapped Moose on the ass and yelled at him, "Hey, Moose baby, you ready to get your fat ugly head kicked in today?"
>
> "I ain't ever [read never] had my head kicked in and it sure ain't going to [read gonna] happen today!" shouted Moose.
>
> "Then, man, why is [read why's] your head so damned [read damn] ugly?" said Willie with a big grin on his face.
>
> "Willie, you'd [read you] better watch what you say, or you won't get any blocking from me today. Maybe I ought to [read oughta] let Nagurski get through the line a few times. He'd crack you real good, maybe even knock out some of those big pearly white teeth of yours. Betcha that would keep you from eating [read eatin'] all those juicy red watermelons," said a confident Moose.

Once he heard the contractions and the elisions in the reading, he was able to modify his writing to reflect the highly colloquial speech.

He also heard the obtrusive repetition of "said," and of the names "Willie" and"Nagurski" in the following paragraph:

> Unknown to Willie, Nagurski had entered the locker room during the exchange of insults and was seated in front of his locker. Nagurski stood upright and pulled off his knit shirt.

> His huge half-naked body, abundant in curly black hair, towered over Willie's slender form. Nagurski reached out with his strong hands and clamped down on Willie's narrow hips. With little effort Nagurski picked Willie up above his head and asked with great authority, "Now who's too fast for Nagurski?"

To eliminate the awkward repetition, he revised the paragraph to read:

> Nagurski had entered the locker room unobtrusively during the exchange of insults and sat quietly taking off his knit shirt. Quickly he stood upright and took two swift strides toward Willie. His huge half-naked body towered over the back's slender form. Nagurski reached out; his strong hands clamped down on Willie's narrow hips. Effortlessly he lifted the stunned player above his head and asked with great authority, "Now who's too fast for Nagurski?"

Along with hearing the stiltedness and the awkward repetition in their writing, the students also began to hear clichés and to become aware of the ways in which their choice of words affected not only the sense but also the tone of their work. The realization that we could and would replay any section of their paper several times made them extremely conscious of their diction.

They also became aware of their sentence patterns. They stopped writing long rambling sentences because they found it so difficult to read and sustain the sense of long rambling sentences. For example, in an early paper one student had written this sentence:

> One of the sentries had spotted six men crawling on their bellies in a quiet like manner toward the other gate and

> towards the wire so they could blow their way through the barbed wire with the long bangalore torpedoes, sectioned tubes of explosive that can blow up and make a path through the barbed wire, so they could run and hit and blow up all the bunkers and main buildings inside the tankyard post.

When he tried to read it, his voice dropped on "and towards the wire," he stumbled on the word "wire" the second time it appeared, he paused noticeably and changed his tone and volume when he read "sectioned tubes. . .," he omitted the word "barbed" before the third "wire," and he could not carry the sense of the sentence over from "torpedoes" to "so." After hearing the tape and discussing the reasons for his poor reading, he revised the sentence as follows:

> One of the sentries had spotted the six men. They were crawling toward the opposite gate, hoping to blast their way through the barbed wire with bangalore torpedoes so they could blow up the bunkers and main buildings inside the tankyard post.

Similarly, the students were able with the help of the tapes to spot and revise clusters of short choppy sentences. By the end of the term the class as a whole had progressed significantly in their ability to vary their sentence patterns to establish the pace and the tone appropriate to a particular passage. As they learned to manipulate their sentences, they also learned to punctuate their writing. Not only did they correct the careless punctuation errors, which had formerly been so distracting, they actually began to use punctuation consciously as a means of indicating how a passage should be read. They separated sentences with periods rather than with commas; they set off parenthetical phrases

in the conventional manner, and so on. For the first time, they saw a connection between punctuation and sense.

Although the cassette most obviously helped the students in improving their diction and their individual sentences, it also appeared to help them in such larger concerns as in the organization of their material. When they heard the tapes, they were able to detect the rambling, the incoherence, and the unnecessary repetition that often escaped their notice when they looked at the manuscript alone. For example, one student began her description of a stereotyped character by saying:

> Professor Caliban thought she was a psychologist, having read a book or two on the subject. She considered herself a genius, as were her husband and her two children. She was a self-proclaimed expert in all fields, and she loved to argue her point of view. Professionally, she was a history professor. Her brain was pickled with facts and important dates. Her husband was a lawyer; he was almost always pickled with whiskey. Professor Caliban had caught him by using facts, psychology, and a padded bra.

When she heard the tape, she noticed two major structural flaws in the paragraph: first, the organization was marred by the shift away from and then back to the husband; and second, the parallelism of the pickled brains needed more emphasis. She, therefore, altered the excerpt to read:

> Professor Caliban considered herself a genius. She was a self-proclaimed expert in all fields. She loved to argue her point of view. She thought she was a psychologist, having read a book or two on the subject. Professionally she was a history

professor. Her brain was pickled with facts and important dates. Her present husband was a lawyer. His brain was pickled with whiskey. Professor Caliban had caught him by using psychology, facts, and a padded bra.

After reading the revised version, she saw that she was building the sense of Professor Caliban's strength and rigidity by making her the subject of each short pounding sentence in which she appeared. Consequently, in the final version of the paper she maintained the rigid sentence pattern when she referred to Professor Caliban, but she deliberately varied it when she referred to the husband or the children.

The tapes were sometimes helpful in indicating to the students the parts of their papers which needed further development. At first, they were surprised to hear how frequently their ideas and descriptions sounded fragmentary and disjointed when they were replayed. Within two weeks there was a noticeable increase in the students' use of concrete details and in the smoothness of the transitions between the larger sections of their papers. The papers became longer and decidedly more coherent. After the students overcame their initial feelings of awkwardness or of "mike fright" in using the cassette, most of them found that they were more fluent on tape than on paper. Consequently, they routinely expanded their rough drafts as they recorded them, and then they incorporated the oral expansions into the revised manuscripts.

In their course evaluations, which they wrote at the end of the term, all of the students except one indicated that the tapes had been very helpful in enabling then to improve their writing, although more than half of them said that they had been frustrated

at first by the "mistakes" they had made in reading their manuscripts and by the amount of time it took them to write something that would sound good. Most of the students said that the tapes had helped them in the ways I have noted here, but one of the more sceptical replied, "I don't know if I learned more by using the tapes than I would have learned without them, but I know one thing: they really made me take a close look at everything I wrote." If they served that function alone, they proved their worth.

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